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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 000749

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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E
LONDON, PARIS, ROME FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [ET](#)
SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: CUD DETAINEES A BARRIER TO DEMOCRACY,
BUT THEIR RELEASE REMAINS KEY

Classified By: AMBASSADOR DONALD YAMAMOTO FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

Summary

11. (S/NF) Since November 2005 when 12 high profile opposition figures and their key supporters were arrested on charges of seeking to overthrow the government through extra-judicial means, the U.S. Embassy has sought to gain their release. In August 2006, the U.S. Mission worked with Prime Minister Meles to engage traditional Ethiopian Elders to negotiate an agreement for the detainees, release. The PM has now placed himself against his party and the hard core secretariat to grant clemency, prior to a judgment by the court in return for a commitment by the detainees to work within the constitution and for an expression of regret for their actions. The Ethiopian Elders, who include respected scholars, diplomats and even a star athlete, report that they have been taken aback by the detainees, shifting positions in negotiations with the PM. The detainees, according to the Elders, feel they hold the upper hand while in prison. Out of prison they would lack the political influence of the other opposition leaders who are now in Parliament and who have a greater voice in political reform issues. The Elders note that the chief detainee, Hailu Shawel, has a &Mandela complex⁸ and is seeking ways to exert his influence over the opposition and the political process, to increase his prominence.

12. (S/NF) Based on talks with the Elders and directly with the detainees, it is clear that CUD leaders risk overplaying their hand. The Prime Minister is prepared to take his offer of a negotiated release off the table and let the Justice system adjudicate the detainees, cases, which could result in long prison terms for the detainees. Even if we are successful in gaining the detainees, release, we will need to work closely with the opposition parties to ensure that the former CUD detainees do not derail the current progress being made on political reform. The elders see Hailu Shawel in particular as being opposed to the constitutional process and to democratic values. Unlike the current opposition leaders whose funding has been cut off by supporters abroad, Hailu would be well funded by a U.S.-based diaspora opposed to the Meles Government and rule by the minority Tigray ethnic group. End Summary.

U.S. Interest: Release the Detainees Despite Blowback

¶3. (S/NF) Since the arrest of the detainees in November 2005 on charges of seeking to overthrow the government through undemocratic means, it has been the U.S. Embassy priority to gain their release. The State Dept issued a statement calling on their release. The U.S. Charge, Vicki Huddleston, pressed Prime Minister Meles to release the prisoners. The Prime Minister agreed, against the wishes of his own party, the EPRDF, and the hardline core secretariat (TPLF) to move forward on clemency prior to any decision by the court, with the understanding that the detainees abide by the constitution and express their regret over their actions. By August, 2006, the U.S. Mission worked with the Prime Minister to look to the traditional Ethiopian Elders as a distinctly Ethiopian mechanism to resolve the political problem.

¶4. (S/NF) Professor Ephraim Isaac formerly of Harvard and Princeton University, Ambassador Bekele, a noted diplomat, Haile Gebreselassie, Olympic gold medalist, and Pastor Daniel, a religious figure of note, together, these four have led the efforts to find a resolution to the detention. The U.S. has supported these efforts as the best way to avoid further political division and to move the nation forward on political reforms.

Negative Factors: Diaspora and EU

¶5. (S/NF) The diaspora has provided a tough campaign in Washington and other capitals condemning the Meles government on every issue. Many of the Ethiopia Diaspora leadership are

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former officials and supporters of the former Communist Derg regime that was overthrown by the current government. They have cut off all financing to opposition leaders who have agreed to enter the Parliament. Noted and respected leaders such as Beyene Petros, the leader of the UPDF, privately told us of the threats against him and his family by the diaspora. His recent visit to Washington was met with severe harassment by the diaspora. A group of parliamentarians including opposition leader Temesken, who visited the U.S. on an international visitor grant, had to keep much of their schedule secret to avoid harassment by the diaspora. The Embassy has also been hit with hate messages for any action deemed supportive of the Meles government. Visiting Congressional staffers to Addis Ababa cautioned that the diaspora had placed some of their supporters on Congressional staffs as interns and low level staff in an effort to support anti-Ethiopian legislation.

¶6. (S/NF) Another problem has been the unhelpful, though good intentioned, efforts of the EU Ambassador and some others diplomats to undercut the efforts of the elders. The EU Ambassador here, pushed not for a mediated solution but for the government to drop all serious charges and to try the detainees on lesser charges. The U.S. Embassy and the elders have argued that the best way forward is to have no trial or verdict on any charges. Any court decision could only fuel more political tension.

¶7. (S/NF) The negative comments from the Diaspora and unhelpful efforts by the EU have emboldened the detainees to resist or lengthen any negotiation with the Elders. According to the Elders, the detainees feel they have a &larger platform8 of support from within prison.

Way Forward: Grant Clemency

¶8. (S/NF) In our private discussions with the Elders at the Residence on March 6 and 7, it was clear that the Elders had made a concerted good faith effort to find a compromise.

After their meeting with the detainees, the Elders said that the detainees expressed apprehension that after their release they would lack the political spotlight and lose political sway. Hailu Shawul, in particular, noted his position as leader of the opposition was more secure behind prison than out of prison and that no compromise was necessary with the PM. He also said that if released, he would never join Parliament. It was clear to the Elders that the detainees thought not about democratic values or how the role they could play in promoting political reform. Rather, their main concern was their image, and how they could pressure the PM to make more concessions.

¶9. (S/NF) The Elders recommended to the PM that he grant clemency without any concrete assurances from the detainees that they would abide by the constitution and any statement of regret. This would force, the Elders noted, the detainees to face their responsibility to work constructively within the constitutional process and would reveal if they support democracy or not.

A Word of Caution

¶10. (S/NF) If the PM should grant clemency, and we will strongly encourage the PM to do so, the Embassy must carefully coordinate with the Elders and other diplomatic missions in private to encourage and remind the former detainees of their obligations as opposition leaders to closely follow the constitution. That their political voice must not be used for personal gain but to advance political reform. The Elders were not convinced that the some of the detainees would refrain from using any means to gain power and to undercut the government, despite progress on political reform, which has been significant.

¶11. (S/NF) Hailu Shawul, while in the U.S. prior to returning to Addis after the 2005 election, told us that he was the leader of the opposition and it was he who set the position for the opposition to follow. He felt it imperative to

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return to Addis to take charge of the opposition after their unexpectedly good showing in the elections and victories in a number of city halls, including Addis Ababa. When opposition leaders decided to enter parliament despite their grievances with the 2005 election result, Hailu convinced a small number to boycott the decision and worked closely with the diaspora to pressure the other opposition parliamentarians to reverse their decision. For Hailu and a few others, the issue is power politics. Never, during our discussions with Hailu, did he ever speak about the rights of the people to voice their views or the nature of political reform. While he compares himself to Mandela, Hailu takes more of a view that laws are to make people comply, not necessarily with the will of the people, but his own. We will need to look closely at Hailu and his hardcore supporters because he will have the wealth and support of the diaspora which does not necessarily agree with the course of political reform in Ethiopia.

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